DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 321 SO 019 476

TITLE Richard Bassett: Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution. A Bicentennial Series, No. 3.
INSTITUTION Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.
REPORT NO CMH-Pub-71-3
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 9p.; For other documents in this series, see SO 019 474-496.
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Biographies; Colonial History (United States); *Military Service; *Political Influences; *Public Service; *Revolutionary War (United States); *State History
IDENTIFIERS *Bassett (Richard); Bicentennial; Delaware; *Signers of the United States Constitution; State Governors; United States Constitution

ABSTRACT

Richard Bassett's experiences as a politician and soldier during the Revolutionary War broadened his political horizons for the War had demonstrated to him the need for greater regional and national cooperation if the political and economic promises of independence for the United States were to be realized. This booklet on Bassett is one in a series on Revolutionary War soldiers who later signed the U.S. Constitution, and reviews covers his political service to Delaware prior to the War, his military service, and his role as a representative from Delaware at the Constitutional Convention and in Delaware's ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Personal data about Bassett and a bibliographic essay of further readings are also included. (DJC)

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Richard Bassett

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Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution
A Bicentennial Series
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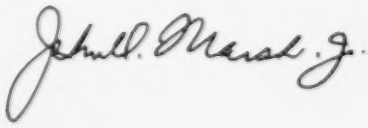
Introduction

In September 1987 the United States commemorates the bicentennial of the signing of the Constitution. Twenty-two of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution were veterans of the Revolutionary War. Their experiences in that conflict made them deeply conscious of the need for a strong central government that would prevail against its enemies, yet one that would safeguard the individual liberties and the republican form of government for which they had fought. Their solution is enshrined in the Constitution. The President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the nation's military forces. But it is the Congress that has the power to raise and support those forces, and to declare war. The Founding Fathers established for all time the precedent that the military, subordinated to the Congress, would remain the servant of the Republic. That concept is the underpinning of the American military officer. These twenty-two men were patriots and leaders in every sense of the word: they fought the war, they signed the Constitution, and they forged the new government. They all went on to careers of distinguished public service in the new Republic. Their accomplishments should not be forgotten by those who enjoy the fruits of their labors. Nor should we forget the fortieth man whose name appears on the Constitution. The Secretary was the twenty-third Revolutionary veteran in the Convention, who continued his service to the nation as one of its first civil servants.

This pamphlet was prepared by the U.S. Army Center of Military History with the hope that it will provide you with the background of a great American; stimulate you to learn more about him; and help you enjoy and appreciate the bicentennial.



John O. Marsh, Jr.
Secretary of the Army

RICHARD BASSETT
Delaware

Richard Bassett, who represented Delaware at the Constitutional Convention, devoted most of his career to the service of his county and state. Reflecting the particular interests and needs of his region, he concentrated on agricultural matters, local military organization, and religious and charitable affairs. Only rarely and for the briefest periods during his adult life did he even travel outside the boundaries of Kent County. Yet at a key moment in his country's history, Bassett asssumed an important role in advancing the cause of a strong central government. He led the fight for ratification of the Constitution in Delaware, an effort crowned on 7 December 1787 when his state became the first to approve the new instrument of government.

Bassett's experiences as a politician and soldier during the Revolution broadened his political horizons. The war had demonstrated, even to a man whose concerns had seldom transcended the confines of his state, the need for greater regional and national cooperation if the political and economic promises of independence for every community and every interest were to be realized. In Bassett's case, the war not only served to focus his attention on such broad issues but also transformed him into an effective proponent of a truly cohesive union of all the states.

THE PATRIOT

Bassett's life illustrates the economic and social opportunities that existed in colonial America. He was born in Cecil County, Maryland. His father, a part-time tavern keeper and farmer, abandoned his family when Bassett was a child. The young man had to depend on the assistance of his maternal relations, but with their help, he eventually became a lawyer and acquired a small plantation. In 1770 he moved to Dover, Delaware, where he practiced law and pursued his agricultural interests. He quickly became a man of property, and began to move with ease in the social world of the local gentry, among whom he developed a reputation for hospitality and philanthropy.

Bassett's legal and charitable activities led naturally to politics. In 1774 he was elected by the voters of Kent County to serve as a member of its Boston Relief Committee. In this role Bassett helped to collect contributions for those suffering hardship as a result of the Coercive Acts, a series of political and economic measures that Parliament had enacted to reassert its control over the colonies, but which the colonists interpreted as a blow to their liberties.

The committee brought Bassett into close working relationship with the leaders of the local patriot movement: Caesar Rodney (who would later sign the Declaration of Independence), his brother Thomas, and John Haslet, the future commander of Delaware's Continental Army regiment. This association led to further political responsibilities during the Revolution, when Bassett represented the citizens of his county in a variety of offices. He participated in the convention that drafted Delaware's Constitution and served three terms in the state Senate and one in the lower house of the state legislature. As a member of both the Delaware and Kent County Councils of Safety, which functioned as the executive arms of those political bodies, Bassett also had the opportunity to help manage the day-to-day fortunes of his state during the crucial years of the Revolution.

THE SOLDIER

Bassett's close association with military affairs began early in 1776 when he helped plan the mobilization of Delaware's forces for service in the Revolution. He developed plans for the organization of Haslet's regiment (perpetuated by today's 198th Signal Battalion, Delaware Army National Guard), the only unit of Continental regulars recruited in the state. Relying on his legal and political skills, he coordinated the all-important task of selecting officers for the regiment, measuring nominees against the military criteria of the day: patriotism, sufficient popularity to attract recruits, and military competence. Bassett's selections were clearly a success; Haslet's Regiment was later judged among the very best combat units in Washington's command.

Bassett was instrumental in raising a militia unit to serve as Delaware's contribution to the Flying Camp, a mobile reserve that provided Washington with some 10,000 men who could be called forward to join the continentals holding New York City. He also helped organize Captain Thomas Rodney's Dover Light Infantry, a company of volunteer militia which served in the Trenton-Princeton campaign late in 1776.

Later emergencies allowed Bassett to learn firsthand the responsibilities of the citizen-soldier. During the summer of 1777 the British entered the upper Chesapeake Bay with the objective of capturing Philadelphia, the American capital. Under Washington's defense plan, Delaware mobilized its militia force under the command of General Caesar Rodney; its mission was to maintain a sector of the cordon thrown up between the approaching British and the capital by combined troops from the middle states. Rodney's units were also expected to delay any possible British drive south toward Baltimore until Washington's continentals could arrive on the scene. Although legally exempted from militia service because of his legislative position, Bassett nevertheless ap-

Engraving, by Charles B. J. Fevret de Saint-Memin (1802), National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; gift of Mr. & Mrs. Paul Mellon.

pears to have joined his friend Rodney in the field as a volunteer. The Delaware militia returned home after the British retired from the area, but Bassett continued as a part-time soldier, assuming command of the Dover Light Horse, Kent County's militia cavalry unit.

Bassett gained a great deal of practical experience and insight during his service in the Revolution. On one hand, he learned how to raise troops and supply them in the field so well that his state repeatedly called on him to manage its mobilizations. But as events propelled him from local leadership to a major role in state affairs, Bassett also came to appreciate the more general point that cooperation between the states was vital. Planning for the common defense against the British in 1777 required him to coordinate frequently with military leaders in Pennsylvania and Maryland as well as with the strategists in Washington's Continental Army. At the same time, his milita service demonstrated to him that sacrifices would be required from citizens of every economic and social level if the concept of the citizen-soldier was to remain effective. The war even seemed to have a profound effect on Bassett's personality, prompting him to adopt a simpler lifestyle. Gone was the ambitious social leader of the local gentry. Instead a quiet, serious, and "most efficient" public servant emerged to deal with the state's postwar problems.

THE STATESMAN

Designing a new national government for the victorious colonies posed a dilemma for politicians like Bassett who represented a small state. A strong central government might well promote economic prosperity and guarantee civil liberties, but it might also subordinate the local interests of the smaller states to the overriding concerns of their larger, more populous neighbors. Bassett's wartime experiences, however, convinced him that the weak government created by the Articles of Confederation had to be strengthened. In 1786 he agreed to represent Delaware at the Annapolis Convention, a meeting called to discuss closer economic cooperation among the states. The Annapolis gathering resulted in a call to the states to meet in Philadelphia the next year to design a new government. Bassett again represented Delaware. Although he rarely addressed the Constitutional Convention, Bassett strongly supported the "Great Compromise" advanced by his colleague John Dickinson and others. Designed to protect the rights of the small states, the compromise called for a national legislature that gave an equal voice to all thirteen states in a senate composed of two representatives from each, but which respected the rights of the majority in a house of representatives based on population.

Actually, Bassett's major contribution to the cause of strong government was made after the Convention. The work of the Founding Fathers would clearly have come to naught if the new Constitution had failed to receive the approval of the states, and historians agree that Bassett was the most important leader in the fight to win ratification in Delaware. Here the political skills and personal alliances that he had forged during the Revolution came to the fore, enabling Bassett to convince his colleagues that a strong central government indeed supported the interests of the smaller states. He won their unanimous agreement just five months after the document had been drawn up in Philadelphia.

Bassett's growing popularity in his state was then rewarded by his election to the new United States Senate. While he continued to support strong government, he allied himself with the moderate wing of the Federalist party that had gathered around Vice President John Adams. As a senator, for example, he supported President Washington's right to control the internal workings of the executive branch through the power of dismissing appointed officials, but he opposed some of Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton's more extreme proposals for advancing the powers of the presidency. Reflecting the continuing concerns of the small states, Bassett was the first to vote for locating the new national capital away from New York and Pennsylvania in an independent federal enclave on the banks of the Potomac River.

Bassett's political interests had never strayed far from the affairs of his state. Even before ending his Senate service, he played a principal role, along

with John Dickinson, in drafting a new constitution for Delaware. In 1793 he began a six-year term as first chief justice of Delaware's Court of Common Pleas, and in 1796 he served as a member of the Electoral College in the presidential election. Bassett followed his previous Federalist loyalties by casting his electoral vote for John Adams. In 1799 he was elected governor. Bearing in mind the lessons he had learned during the Revolution, Governor Bassett actively executed his responsibilities as commander in chief of the Delaware militia, working with veterans of the Continental Army to improve its organization. He was particularly conscious of the importance of leadership in a military unit and devoted much care to the selection and commissioning of militia officers as a means of ensuring the revitalization of his state's military forces.

Bassett's tenure as governor of Delaware was the natural culmination of a public life spent in service to his state. Although his remarkable contribution to the cause of strong national government epitomized the breadth of his vision, his active promotion of an effective union of the states was always motivated by concerns for the interests, welfare, and liberties of his own home state.

The Congress shall have Power . . .
To raise and support Armies . . . ;
To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia . . . ;

ARTICLE I, Section 8.

Personal Data

BIRTH: 2 April 1745, at "Bohemia Manor," Cecil County, Maryland*
OCCUPATION: Lawyer and Planter
MILITARY SERVICE:
Captain, Delaware Militia—3 years
PUBLIC SERVICE:
United States Senate—4 years
Governor of Delaware—2 years
DEATH: 15 August 1815, in Kent County, Delaware
PLACE OF INTERMENT: Wilmington and Brandywine Cemetery, Wilmington, Delaware

*In 1752 the English-speaking world adopted the Gregorian calendar, thereby adding 11 days to the date. Thus Bassett's date of birth was recorded in 1745 as 21 March.

Further Readings

The only biography of Bassett is Robert E. Pattison's *The Life and Character of Richard Bassett* (1900). However, biographical details are contained in Henry C. Conrad's *History of the State of Delaware* (3 vols., 1908); George Johnston's *History of Cecil County, Maryland* (1881); Charles P. Mallery's *Ancient Families of Bohemia Manor* (1888); John T. Scharf's *History of Delaware 1609-1888* (2 vols., 1888); and *Delaware Archives. Military* (5 vols., 1911-1919). Other books which shed light on the creation of the Constitution and the role of the military in the early history of the nation include Sol Bloom's *The Story of the Constitution* (1937); Catherine Bowen's *Miracle at Philadelphia* (1966); Don Higginbotham's *The War of American Independence* (1971); Richard Kohn's *Eagle and Sword* (1975); Clinton Rossiter's *1787: The Grand Convention* (1966); and Robert K. Wright, Jr.'s *The Continental Army* (1983).

Cover: *Scene of the Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, by Howard Chandler Christy, courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

CMH Pub 71-3